

INTERVIEW WITH IRWIN THOMPSON
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Q: Good afternoon. Today is March 2nd, 2017. My name is Sally and I am here at the Newton City Hall with Irwin Thompson. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. Okay, the first question is what is your connection to Newton?

A: Well, I've lived in Newton now for quite a few years. Let me see. I moved here, to be here, to live here, and I've been here now more than 20 years.

Q: What were you doing before you entered the service or what was life like for you before you entered the service?

A: Well, I was an academic physician on the west coast, University of Washington in Seattle, and after that I continued my life in academia, moving to Stockholm. And then I was drafted from Stockholm, and that was in 1968, so now we're going back quite a few years.

Q: Okay. What did you miss most about home, aside from family and friends?

A: Well, I had been traveling around forever, as it were, because I grew up in Scotland and I went to Medical School at the University of Glasgow and from there I went to the west coast. I lived there for five years, so I was always moving around, following my academic interests and my scholarly interests. And so I actually left my family pretty early when I was like 22 years of age in Scotland, and at that point I moved to Tennessee for a year.

Q: Okay. How did you join and why did you choose the specific branch of the military?

A: Well, I was a physician and at the time that I was drafted it was the Vietnam War, and the Army was desperately short of physicians. So they were scouring the planet for people who were eligible, and I was eligible because I was a legal immigrant to the United States and at that point,

like I said, I was actually living in Sweden, but they were desperate for doctors and they tracked me down.

So, it was a complicated system, because living in Sweden I had the option to not return to the United States or allow myself to be drafted and then I would be eligible for, if I so chose, to become a citizen of the United States, so it was a very complex situation where I could have stayed in Sweden and I had a job and I was actually doing a PhD. But if I didn't accept the commission that was offered at that time, the terminology that they used was that I would be declared an undesirable alien and would never be readmitted to the United States. So, it was a whole different world then, because you had to follow the rules, and they did that. That's what they did, because I knew several people who had declined to allow themselves to be drafted and then later they wanted to come back into the States and they weren't allowed. So, things were different back then, I can tell you that for sure.

Q: How did you adapt to military life, including physical regimen, barracks, food, and social life?

A: Well, I was married with one child, so I'm sure in some ways that made the adaptation easier. Secondly, I was situated in what was called the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, which is actually the biggest army hospital outside of the United States, the biggest army hospital in the world outside of the United States, so it was a huge, complicated operation. Back then they had over a hundred physicians, they still do, and over 200 nurses. So it was very, very complex, and it was like working in a major academic hospital, which is what I had sort of done all my life, so that part of it was easy, number one. Number two, again because of their system, which is hard for you all to understand as I talk about it, because it's so weird, I had been drafted as a Captain, and because I had been--I had graduated from Medical School at a very early age, the system in the Army then, I have no idea what it is now, but then they promoted you from when

you started Medical School. And I actually started Medical School when I was 16 and a half years of age. I like to joke that I was a boyhood genius.

But anyway, because I had started Medical School so early, once I got in there they kept promoting me. And that was actually quite horrifying to the regular Army staff who were there, because for example they made me a Major in eight weeks, and the other Majors that were there had been eight years in the Army and now I was of a rank with them. And actually four weeks later or six weeks later they made me a Lieutenant Colonel, so I mean that was really a big deal.

So, these kinds of advances, on the one hand they made my life a little difficult in terms of getting on with the rest of the staff. We had nine doctors in our unit. I was an OB-GYN. We had nine doctors in our unit, so some had made it difficult, on the other hand I was a very hardworking person and they could see that, and that made their lives easier and so on and so forth. So, it was kind of a balance where it all worked out. It was a little difficult in the beginning because of the fact that my rapid promotions did cause a little problem. On the other hand, it's better to be promoted than not.

Q: Where was the hospital where you were stationed?

A: It's about 40 miles from Heidelberg, so it was actually in a beautiful part of the countryside, and there was a small, there still is, but it's grown a lot, it's actually called Landstuhl. There was the name of it, Landstuhl. And Landstuhl is adjacent to the Ramstein Air Force Base which is the biggest Air Force Base in the world outside the United States. So, it was a very well set up--the total facility was very well set up for conducting U.S. foreign policy in Germany, because Ramstein--people, warriors who were wounded in Vietnam, which was when I was in service, were flown directly after their initial battlefield therapy, were flown directly to Ramstein and admitted to our hospital. So, in addition to all the usual hospitals we had a huge emergency department doing primary surgery on these poor wounded guys. And we also had a reserved

MASH unit, and I was in part of that reserve MASH unit which was always on call to be sent to Vietnam if we had to do that.

Q: How did you stay in touch with families and friends back home?

A: Well, that was the difficult part, because being there in the military it was easy enough to call or write or whatever, and my family lived in Scotland, so that part was relatively easy communication-wise, but of course there was no computers, no emails, nothing like that. So, by hand I guess is what you were saying.

Q: Where exactly did you serve? Do you remember arriving and what was it like? You talked a little bit about where.

A: Well yeah, in fact it's even more complicated than I outlined to you. When I was in Sweden, the first thing I had to do was to go back to Fort Sam Houston in Texas. All military inductees, I mean physician inductees were made, were processed through Fort Sam Houston, so I had to go back there to Fort Sam Houston and undergo Basic Training and orientation to the military for six weeks, and that's where I was in the beginning. That was the first thing.

The second thing was once you're in the Army, I know this is hard for you to understand, but you are--you have to do what they say. So, when I was first drafted I had an official letter saying that I was going to be drafted to Germany, but that I had to go back to Texas, and my initial obligation would be for two years. Once I got to Texas within like five days they informed me that my orders had been changed and that I was going to Europe for three years. Or, they always give you options, or I could go to Vietnam for two years. So, this is how they do it. I want you to understand I'm not criticizing the military in any way, I'm actually pro-military in many ways, but forget about following civilian rules, it doesn't exist. You just do what you're told. Now, I

think it's still the same way to some extent, not to that extent, because that was pretty drastic, but that is what happened to me.

So, once I got there everything changed--where I was going, how long I was going, and blah, blah, blah. So, that was difficult, because once I got there all the rules were changed on me and I wasn't allowed any options.

Q: Tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences, positive or negative.

A: Well, there were a lot of very positive things, because I had a very long academic background and so I was chosen for a number of projects there in the hospital, which, as I said, was a major hospital. So, I started up a specialized infertility clinic, which they never had in all the years that they had been there. So, very early in the game I was just flooded with tons of patients. We took care of all the dependents. And, let's see, I had written this down for my information before. We basically took care of at least 50,000 military personnel families scattered throughout Germany, and they were from major problems or major issues, they all came to our hospital.

So, once I started this clinic we were just overwhelmed with patients who had no kind of medical care like that before, because again you have to understand within the structure of the Army there, and it's still the same thing, dependents are--they're very well treated, but they're not thought of as being the primary mission of the Army. So, the primary mission was to train soldiers, get them battle ready, and then dependents, and that includes women, children, families, are sort of second tier, but I don't mean to be too critical when I say that, because they get the finest medical care and all that kind of stuff. So, I kind of fell into all that. It was waiting to be developed by somebody who had experience with academic medicine and that was me, basically.

Q: Do you recall the day your service ended?

A: It was approximately September the 3rd in 1971. There was a little--I say approximately, because there was a screw-up backwards and forwards whether I was going to be out on the first or the fifth or whatever, and the Department of Civilians or whatever it was solved that problem. I just did what I was told at that point, because I wanted to leave.

Q: What was it like to return to civilian life?

A: Well, it was completely new for me, because at that point I came to Boston for the first time in my life and so it was the first time I had been to Boston and Massachusetts. As I said, I had spent all of my, except for a year, all of my time on the west coast, so I was very west coast oriented. I had been up and down the whole west coast. I had never been to Massachusetts. And I had a teaching appointment at Harvard from being in the Army. Again that is kind of an unusual situation, but because of my academic achievements before I went into the Army, this guy at the Brigham and Harvard had been following my career, and so he offered me a job here, when I came here in 1971.

Q: How did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on the war and the military in general?

A: Well, they changed my life totally and utterly, because at the time I was drafted, I was on an academic path, I was doing a PhD in Sweden, I was kind of a peacenik. My wife then, then wife was a leading American peacenik in Stockholm, so she was quite prominent in that and I was working away my academic thing.

When I look back on it, if I had had any sense I would have joined her in the front rank of the marchers marching through Stockholm, because the CIA were filming all of that and I would

have been on record as whatever. They probably wouldn't have drafted me, you see. But of course I wasn't clever enough to do that.

So, I changed from being this academic wonk to being, I mean, I was right in the thick of things, right in the thick of the military, things were happening all the time. They were constantly threatening to send our MASH unit to Vietnam and I was busy as hell in a whole different environment, just doing stuff. And I enjoyed it in many ways, because I felt I was making a real contribution, and as I say I set up all these new departments and things which were very useful to a lot of people, so that always gives you a good feeling.

Q: What would you like people to know 100 years from now?

A: To know? Well, I'm not a great believer in these sorts of issues, because I think you've got things historically, people have a whole different idea of how they were when people look at them historically. They're not usually as good as they thought they were. So I don't think in those terms. I live for the moment and a hundred years from now I'll be like all of us, I'll be gone.

Q: So it looks like our time is just about up.

A: Already? I'm just starting.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to say? We have plenty of time.

A: Oh we have time?

Q: We're just out of the questions.

A: Oh you're out of questions.

Q: Yeah. If there is more you would like to share please continue.

A: Oh, you can ask me any questions you want as far as that goes. I would say that I didn't touch upon the fact that I do have a high regard for the military, and I donate to a lot of veterans organizations. I'm not actively involved with any, but I get a lot of letters from the local vets and stuff like that. But I don't participate in that sort of a thing, because I mean I was in academic medicine for 30 years, that was more of what the nature of my life was, and then when I retired, or before I retired I was an artist, I still am an artist. I'm a very active artist here in the city of Newton. So, that is kind of where my preoccupation is. But I do have a high regard for the military, I support them with donations and all the stuff and other things that I do to indicate the fact that I hold them in high regard.

Q: Would you talk a little more about your art?

A: Sure. Let's see. I've been an artist now for 25 years. I do contemporary, what I call contemporary abstraction, and I'm very involved in that and I've had a lot of art shows in New England. I've been a member of different galleries, five or six different galleries. I've had several shows at the New Art Center here in Newton. I have a very active website. You can check it out right now if you want. It's IrwinEThompsonArt.com, and if you look at it you will see that I cover a range of topics, all done in abstract and contemporary art way.

So I'm very involved with that. I have a studio in Newton Upper Falls, Historic Newton Upper Falls, and I go there just about every day and I sort of paint every day. And then locally in this part in Newton I always participated in Newton Open Studios, and this year with the New Art Center and Newton Open Studios, so that's what I've been doing.

Q: That is really cool. Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

A: Not specifically. I'm open to answering any kinds of questions.

Q: What did you learn from treating wounded soldiers?

A: Well, don't forget, I was treating mostly the dependents, wives, but again, the Army had its own peculiar system for dealing with all these things. See, I do know a lot about how the Army worked in Germany. First of all, I was European anyway, so being Scottish I was always familiar with events in the war, the Second World War. I'm going to come back to that question you asked me in a minute, but in fact I lived through the Second World War in Scotland. I was just a young child then and where I lived, Glasgow, was the second most bombed city in the United Kingdom, because Glasgow was the center of shipbuilding for the British Empire and for the British effort in the Second World War. So we were targets by the Nazis, and so we used to have to get up at night and the air raid shelters would be screeching and the flashlights flashing, and you could hear the bombs flying. We used to have to get up at night. We slept with bags under our beds. We would jump out of bed, grab our bag, and head for the air raid shelter.

So, I was always knowledgeable about the Second World War and all the things that happened and that came from that and so on involving Europe. Germany of course was terribly destroyed in the Second World War, but they rebuilt thanks to American money. That's what the American war effort, post-war was, mostly in Europe, was to rebuild Germany, because they recognized it as a powerhouse. And this is one of the ironical things, for example. The end of the Second World War, Britain, with all the heroism that they had and all the people that were slaughtered, they owed the United States over 100 billion dollars and the United States made Britain pay that all back. Whereas Germany, which was so deeply in debt and everything, we rebuilt it.

So I was very much aware of all that stuff, because I was also a history buff and I looked at all these things. So when I was in Germany I was aware of all these different kind of aspects of what the relationship between Britain, Germany, and the U.S. was, and there was a lot of financial stuff. So, when I was serving there I could see all the money that the United States was pouring into rebuilding Germany and rebuilding the German economy, and you can see the results now. Germany is the strongest economic power in Europe and Britain is one of the worst, so that has persisted since the Second World War.

Q: Do you think growing up through the Second World War had any impact on your views of the military?

A: Not really, because everybody who was growing up in Scotland at that time knew somebody who had been killed in the war, and my own uncle was killed when he was 18. He was a sailor and he was on the first convoy to sail across the Atlantic from Scotland to the United States, and his ship went down. They were the first convoy to be exposed to U2 attacks, so that was a massacre. They lost something like 70 ships from that one convoy and they all went down. And it was the Bay of Biscay and it was stormy and they all went down, nobody survived. So, I had an uncle that that happened to. And my own grandfather, he was in the First World War, and he was heavily wounded in Germany during the First World War, and when he came back he was completely war damaged, and was hospitalized for a while and then he came out, and he had absolutely classic PTSD. But of course it wasn't known that was a syndrome back then, so people just said, "Everybody is going to talk like that." They said, "He's been in the war and it got to him," that was the phrase they used, the men that had had that experience of PTSD were basically a little crazy. And there was no medical therapy, whatever. So yeah, I had direct family experience with that, my grandfather and cousin.

Q: Definitely. Was there anything else you would like to add?

A: Well, just to say, as I said, that the military, I think they do a great job. It's a very different life and if you've had no exposure to it you can't understand what the discipline--how the military means to the people, for better or for worse. I mean the better part is if you do your job you're going to be compensated and they're going to look after your family. The worst part is if you have to go to war, the Middle East, Afghanistan, whatever. People back home, unless they're aware of it, they don't really pay that much attention to it. I don't know how much they care, frankly.

Q: Well, just thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us.

A: It's my pleasure.

Q: We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: I'm happy to be here and to give you my point of view.

Q: Thank you.

__: After formally finishing their interview the participant shared another story which will follow without introduction here.

A: As I said, we are, Landstuhl is the biggest Army hospital in the world outside of the United States, and one of the big things was, and the reason I got sidetracked was I was discussing a little bit about once you're in the Army it's a whole different world, that if you've never had any exposure to it through reality so directly you can't begin to understand. So, the Army had a policy that, first of all, all of the draftees who were sent immediately to Vietnam, they were all young kids from the Midwest. They had basically no experience from life. They were drafted out of high school and they lived in the Midwest all their lives. I don't know if you've had many

years in the Midwest, but it's different [Laughter] from both coasts, I've lived in both coasts and my daughter lives in Chicago, and I've been all around the Midwest.

So, these young men who were just like as it were the salt of the Earth, because they were so good and they were trained in discipline and so on and so forth, they were sucked up and sent to Vietnam, and they had no idea what was happening to them. They all got on drugs and all kinds of things. The Army made a political decision that those who were severely wounded would not be brought back directly to the United States, because they were afraid. First of all, some of you know, or may know, there was tremendous opposition to the Vietnam War, tremendous, and so the Army figured out that if they brought back home these what had been healthy young men who were now basket cases, drug addicts, and who had been physically wounded, you can imagine what was that like, what it would be like if they were brought back here and deposited. I mean imagine like in Newton if there was suddenly 50 kids like that. Everybody would know about it and there would be all kinds of demonstrations.

So, they in fact were brought back to Landstuhl for psychotherapy, well physical therapy, I mean physical treatment if they needed it, but also we had a huge psychotherapy unit. So you would see like little cavalcades of guys walking around, totally lost and lost in space and stuff like that. And I go out and sort of walk around. You weren't actually allowed to talk to them. So, here was I in the Army and also in the Army high ranking Officer, I'm not allowed to talk to these, I mean they weren't my patients directly, but they were clear debris and evidence of the war. So, that was something that I was very much aware of, because I saw them every day walking on the grounds and they were all basket cases. So that was very difficult for me, because I felt that the Army was doing what they could, but they needed intense psychotherapy and they certainly weren't getting that.

And PTSD even then wasn't really a recognized illness as it is now, so there was no specific therapy. And by the way, that is still a big lag in the military, not just the Army but all the

military, because I know a couple of shrinks who work in the military and PTSD is kind of something that is swept under the carpet. So I was very aware of that at that time, not having that label, but I was very aware of large numbers of very young American males being sequestered over there until they had six months of so-called psychotherapy before they were brought back. All kinds of stuff like that that I was aware of, but couldn't do anything about it, and you certainly didn't want to walk around talking about it or you would be completely ostracized.

Q: Do you know at all what the psychotherapy consisted of?

A: Well, it was very basic. First of all, we didn't have a huge number of shrinks there, and they needed, I mean when you have that kind of situation you need pretty intense one-on-one psychotherapy. We still don't have that, by the way. If you watch any of these programs at all, these scandals about veterans affairs here, right now, right today in this country these people are not being treated properly. And this is all these years later.

Q: Thank you.

A: I hope I don't sound too depressing. It is hard to give--

END OF INTERVIEW